

Unpenning Words: Releasing Literature From Within *Dreaming Inside-Voices from Junee Correctional Centre*

Aunty Barbara Nicholson, Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis and Chloe Higgins

'I knew I can paint my story, but I never knew that I could write it, too!' (workshop participant at Junee Correctional Centre, 2013).

From the letters written by Bennelong in 1796 and the work of Kevin Gilbert, who was awarded the National Book Council Award in 1978 and the Human Rights Award for Literature in 1988, to the award-winning books by Kim Scott (2000) and Alexis Wright (2007), both recipients of the Miles Franklin Award, Aboriginal writing¹ has consistently contributed to Australian history and the canon of Australian literature. By comparison with other creative mediums such as Aboriginal art, performance or film, Indigenous writing² does not have the same level of currency. In order to address this dichotomy, effective support of literary activities through fostering creative writing is needed. Effective support includes strategic federal and state funding that enables Indigenous people access and participation in cultural dialogue on all levels, from beginners to experienced writers.

The South Coast Writers Centre (SCWC) has a long-standing focus on the development and propagation of Indigenous voices in the Australian literary landscape. Since 2000, the SCWC has developed a literary program with and for Aboriginal people that not only celebrates but also recognises Indigenous peoples and identities and addresses the fact that Aboriginal writing is elementary to Australian history and politics. The program further addresses the fact that Aboriginal literature is less prominent in the public psyche than its counterparts in visual arts and sports. While efforts to achieve equity through the support of Aboriginal art are well established through art cooperatives, for example, Indigenous authors are far less nurtured. Tony Birch noted in his keynote speech at the 20th Edinburgh International Book Festival, Edinburgh World Writers Conference in 2013, that 'too many Australians remain ignorant of the creative and intellectual reach of Aboriginal writing, knowing little beyond the degree to which it serves us and fits within a national narrative' (2013).

Funding for meaningful literary activities is at the heart of long-term success, as has been pointed out by Anita Heiss: 'although funding and other mechanisms are in place and possibilities afforded Indigenous writers have improved, opportunities are still limited...' (2000). This is particularly true for those Indigenous Australians whose access to secondary and tertiary education is limited by personal circumstance. The SCWC is trying to tackle this limited access in two ways. One of the key projects in the SCWC's Indigenous literary program is the creative workshop series with male Indigenous inmates at Junee Correctional Centre, NSW, and the other is the Aboriginal writers mentorship program, both of which are coordinated by an Aboriginal project coordinator and by an Aboriginal project leader.

¹ The term 'Aboriginal' is used predominantly in the article as we work primarily with Aboriginal writers and community members.

² The term 'Indigenous' is used in this essay to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in the case of the Indigenous-writer-in residence and the Indigenous literary program, also includes indigenous people and their writing from around the world.

What is the Dreaming Inside-Junee Project?

Having previously conducted readings at the Junee Correctional Centre (JCC) in 2010 as part of the 'Write On The Murray Festival,' the SCWC's Aboriginal writers decided to make a return visit to the JCC in 2012. On this visit Black Wallaby project leader, Aunty Barbara Nicholson, flagged the idea of producing a publication of inmate work. The Junee project, now called Dreaming Inside-Junee Project, gathered momentum in 2012 with the help of regional funding from Arts NSW for the first year. During the Week of NAIDOC 2012 Aunty Barbara Nicholson, Simon Luckhurst, Bruce Pascoe and John Muk Muk Burke facilitated a series of workshops at the JCC and subsequently the tutors determined to pursue the possibility of publishing the proceedings of the workshop. This work were supplemented by some pieces written by the tutors, which were originally read at the final NAIDOC Ceremony at the JCC.

Since then, the Black Wallaby Aboriginal writers and guest tutors have conducted two series of creative writing workshops a year with the Indigenous inmates at the premises of the JCC. The team also holds public readings for the local community and their Elders. In 2015, the program reached its fourth year and now runs with the help of fundraising activities, sponsorship and partnership with other organisations, including Arts NSW, Junee Correctional Centre and the Wollongong Art Gallery, where the Dreaming Inside³ anthology is launched every May as part of the Sydney Writers' Festival. This project is a potent example of SCWC's Indigenous literary program and how it promotes connections between people in physical spaces.

The partnerships extended also to the creative output of the anthology: the cover for the first volume of Dreaming Inside-Voices From Junee Correctional Centre, was produced in collaboration with the inmates in group printing classes facilitated by Wiradjuri woman, Aunty Kath Withers at the JCC.

At the JCC, under the inspirational leadership of Cultural Officer Gerome Brodin many fine paintings, wooden artefacts, bead creations and dance productions, occur. We are confident that in expressing our humanity through many media a certain healing of the spirit occurs within all of us: this is no less true for those in correctional centres (Burke and Nicholson, 2013).

The gaol's Cultural Centre is a great example of how fostering creativity can be a means of healing, learning and self-expression. The space that houses the Cultural Centre is a huge, former sports hall, which has been transformed into a creative hub for inmates. Within this space, and two doors down from the cultural Centre's office, is a room where everyday a choir practices songs from the seventies and eighties; the voices travel easily up into the loft studios, where, as elsewhere in the main area, visual artists transform anything that can be painted on—from doors, room dividers, boards, to tables, and the list goes on—into something interesting to look at. It is as if they try and tease out the potential of the medium and make it shine. Some of the works are small masterpieces. The approximately six-meter high walls that encapsulate all these spaces are adorned with hundreds of paintings, some executed in style and surprising accomplishment, given that most of the artists picked up a brush in this prison for the first time.

³ 'Dreaming Inside:' short for the anthology *Dreaming Inside-Voices from Junee Correctional Centre* and the Dreaming Inside-Junee Project, and not to be confused with *Dreaming Inside*, an art project on Aboriginal art produced in prison as discussed in Sylvia Kleinerts' paper of the same title. The title for the Black Wallaby project came about during the second series of writing workshops, when Indigenous inmate participants voted democratically for a title of the anthology comprising their writings.

There are portraits of famous sports people such as Cathy Freeman and Mohammed Ali, but also political and spiritual leaders like Malcolm X, Ghandi, and religious figures such as Mother Teresa, Buddha and Jesus. Proudly displayed amongst them are portraits of local Wiradjuri Elders. The National Apology to the Stolen Generation is meticulously reproduced over a painting of the Aboriginal flag as well as Aboriginal totems such as a six-meter long crocodile. Side by side, diverse cultural icons are represented and mythical creatures like a ten-meter long dragon that weaves its way through the many cultures and faiths exhibited here. Aunty Barbara Nicholson and John Muk Muk Burke explain it thus: ‘as a visitor to this facility, one cannot help but be awestruck by the beauty and serenity of the place (2013).’

Since the first visit in 2012, other tutors, together with John Muk Muk Burke and Aunty Barbara Nicholson, have worked with the Black Wallaby team in this inspiring place: Ron Pretty, Jack Backer, Ken Canning, and the SCWC director, Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, to conduct workshops that continue to be held twice yearly at the JCC.

With this concentration of tutelage, it is not surprising that over the past three years, the Dreaming Inside project has become the core of the Indigenous⁴ literary program at the SCWC on which some of the other projects, such as the Black Wallaby Indigenous Writers’ Night in the Wollongong Art Gallery and the emerging mentorship program hinge. By promoting the carriage of Indigenous voices from the inside, the project also aims to inspire inmate contributors to continue writing once on the outside. The annual publication of the anthology, *Dreaming Inside: Voices from Junee Correctional Centre*, which is launched every year at the Sydney Writers’ Festival event held at the Wollongong Art Gallery, plays a crucial part in the dissemination of Aboriginal voices in the wider Australian society and has received enthusiastic responses from audiences. This event is the only Indigenous literary event of its kind in the Illawarra/South Coast and is a key local event which draws usually an audience of about one hundred visitors.

Testament to the ever-expanding nature of the project is the mentorship program. In 2015, for the first time in SCWC’s history, the Black Wallaby team conducted these workshops in conjunction with a mentorship program funded by an Aboriginal Regional Arts Funding (ARAF) grant, Arts NSW, which allows emerging Indigenous writers to expand their networks, develop their skills and pass on the knowledge, expertise and history of the Black Wallaby writers.

It is important that the Dreaming Inside project is spearheaded by the Indigenous Black Wallaby Writers team in collaboration with the SCWC Aboriginal Consultation Team, an advisory body on cultural protocol for entire Indigenous literary program. The Black Wallaby Writers aim ‘to provide another creative avenue to express Aboriginal inmates’ voices beyond the well-established working in the visual arts’ (Burke and Nicholson, 2013).

In its fourth year, the Indigenous literary program continues to grow. First, in 2015, SCWC ran a creative writing workshop with Aboriginal secondary school students in collaboration with a local high school. Secondly, there is the SCWC Indigenous Writer-in-residence program. Bruce Pascoe was the first resident in May 2015, who launched volume III at the Black Wallaby Indigenous Writers event; Jim Everett presented the same volume at the Wollongong Writers

⁴ The term Indigenous is used throughout this essay to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in the case of the Indigenous-writer-in residence and the Indigenous literary program, also includes indigenous people and their writing from around the world.

Festival in November 2015, and John Muk Muk Burke, Wiradjuri poet, writer and recipient of the David Unaipon Award, 1983, launched Volume IV in May 2016, as part of the Sydney Writers' Festival. This project is supported by Federal funding for 2015/16.

Purpose and Challenges

Facilitating creative writing at the JCC does present some challenges, as explained by Aunty Barbara Nicholson:

In terms of the creative writing classes, the Black Wallaby team encounters a broad range of interest and skills. We often are informed by inmates, "Oh I can't write, I've never written, I don't know what poetry is" and so on. Frequently, this proves to be correct as some inmates have no literacy skills at all, in which case we endeavour to get them to tell their stories and we transcribe. Some are embarrassed about their lack of education skills and this requires special attention from the Black Wallaby team to overcome their shyness. Among those who have good literacy skills, they often begin writing enthusiastically and sometimes produce a book-length volume of work. (Nicholson 2015)

This demonstrates another level the creative writing workshops tap into. The workshops are not only about skill development, but also about self-discovery and breaking down self-perceptions. Therefore, the process of writing and publishing their stories is not only giving voice to inmates and their particular experiences, but it changes the perception of what is possible. At the second workshop in 2015, for example, inmates were pouring over copies of volume I, II and III which contained writings by fellow inmates (two of whom were present on the day) which was followed by an impromptu reading and cheering. The use of creative writing as a tool can enable the transformation of self-conception as a writer/storyteller as 'in all cases, the inmate contributors develop a deep sense of self-worth and a growing confidence in their ability to learn new skills' (Nicholson, interview 2015). Creativity acts as a cultural broker, as a conduit of emotions, and a bridge between inside and outside (of prison), and a means of personal transformation. Furthermore, for Aunty Barbara Nicholson the writing means that:

Coming from an oral culture, having the opportunity to have your work in print is a tantalising concept that instantly resonates with the Aboriginal inmates as it allows them passage out of the margins and into the main body. They relish the thought of being able to, in their words, "rattle the cage" of the dominant culture. (Nicholson, interview 2015)

The dissemination across the wider public is another crucial part of having a voice on the outside, and bringing attention to Indigenous voices from within. The *Dreaming Inside* anthology allows for reflection, for both target groups, the inmates on the one side and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers on the other, as Nicholson explains:

Perhaps the most important purpose of the Dreaming Inside project is to bring the little known voices of Aboriginal inmates in corrective service institutions to a broad-reading public, which is hoped will give the public a deeper understanding of the humanity of prison inmates. (Nicholson, interview 2015)

Nicholson also points out that there is a broader use of the anthology, as it serves as primary literature: 'The "Dreaming Inside" project has enjoyed numerous readings in and out of academia, public launches and is on a number of study lists in higher education' (Nicholson, interview 2015).

In mainstream Australia, the written word is a major player in the field of cultural production. Empowerment through the written word is therefore potent and far-reaching as the margin-centre binary is still prevalent, culturally and physically. Creative writing gives agency to the marginalised, and as bell hooks explains '[t]o be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body' (xvi). In the case of Indigenous inmates, who are culturally and physically removed and segregated by gender, and must maintain institutionally regulated behaviour, this marginalisation of Indigenous, male inmates leads to further loss of agency.

However, creative writing has the potential to help inmates to become players in the game as 'another important purpose is to provide the participating inmates with new skills and tools that may be beneficial in helping them choose other life pathways and to broaden their concept of self and self-worth' (Nicholson, 2015).

Interconnectivity through readings and book launches in the community is another tangible outcome of the creative workshop series and the publication of *Dreaming Inside: Voices from Junee Correctional Centre* as

In reference to the inmate participants themselves, there are diverse outcomes. Many of the participants we see only once so there is little opportunity of building on their skill sets. Of the few who we see regularly there is clear evidence that they have improved to a significant extent. In every case they are enthusiastic contributors who relish the opportunity to have their voice heard and see their work in print. (Nicholson, 2015)

The Politics of Writing and Editing

Arguably, there are the questions about the use of a creative method that clearly has its roots in Western modes of communication to disseminate Indigenous voices and whether or not writing perpetuates neo-colonial attitudes. In an Australia where Aboriginal sovereignty, in ways that are appropriate to Aboriginal people, is still not legally recognised, the use of writing can be a tool used to 'beat the master at his own game,' according to Aunty Barbara Nicholson. She argues against bell hooks' notion that bringing down the house with the Master's tools is impossible. Aboriginal activists, including Charles Perkins, have used the Masters' tools to play and beat them at their own game by gaining access to schools, even tertiary education. 'To use non-Indigenous tools has been a successful strategy of Aboriginal activism and resistance over the past 200 plus years,' says Aunty Barbara Nicholson (2015).

Therefore, following a magnificent response from both inmates and staff at the Junee Correctional Centre, the first workshop proceedings were published in the 2013 anthology, Volume I to underpin the fact that having these voices recorded is in itself a political act.

The *Dreaming Inside* anthology of writing and visual reflections by the inmates and their tutors is an interesting combination of different art forms. There is, of course, the writing by the inmates who, for the first time in many instances, have attempted to express themselves in the written word and whose work, in the 'interests of cultural maintenance' largely retains the grammar and spelling of the original manuscripts in order to capture the authors' voices. This

decision largely to refrain from editing grammar or spelling is an unusual one within the publishing industry but the team felt it was necessary so as to not impose alien structures on the story-telling process that takes place. It further gives the reader a 'framework in which to understand both the works itself' and also the environment 'from which the authors' situations have derived' (Nicholson, 2014:6).

The different editing process also has a political message. Tutor Aunty Barbara Nicholson explains:

As an activist, I'm totally committed to the principal of Aboriginal self-determination and that translates to all aspects of Aboriginal life including their writing. I firmly believe that they have the right to have their voices heard in whatever way they express themselves and if that means that they have grammar, spelling and literacy skills that do not meet the conventional literary standards then so be it. I believe in maintaining their spelling, their grammar, and their expressions. This affords the reading public a multiplicity of reasons why the inmates are where they are and why they are in the situation they're in. Their educational disadvantage is a profound statement about a wider social problem in intercultural relations in Australia. Above all I believe the inmate contributors, as do writers everywhere, have the right to have their work reproduced exactly as they expressed it. (Nicholson, interview September, 2015)

There is no doubt that aspects of the project are intentionally blurring boundaries of literature and what constitutes writing and editing.

Certain preoccupations are evident in the works offered: the hope of all the writers that recidivism will be reduced was expressed one way or another in all the works. The loneliness and boredom of prison emerged as a strong theme as did the longing for the day when the men would be re-united with their families – especially their children. (Burke and Nicholson, 2013)

The SCWC Indigenous Emerging Writers Mentorship Program

The Dreaming Inside Project is expanding in 2016 into a platform of learning for emerging Indigenous writers as part of SCWC's Black Wallaby Indigenous writers mentorship program, which commenced in 2015 with the support of an Aboriginal Regional Arts Funding (ARAF) grant.

The mentorship program builds on the already established, strong partnership with the JCC. The mentorship is a training program that covers skill development in facilitating creative writing workshops as well as induction to the projects' aims, objectives and protocols (both cultural and those of the correctional facility). It takes place in two locations: 1) at the SCWC-operated premises in Wollongong, 2) mentors and mentees team-teach the creative workshops with inmates at the JCC Cultural Centre.

To this end the SCWC has initiated a cultural protocol awareness seminar for writers who are writing about Aboriginal people and issues. The protocol framework is informed by the AIATSIS guidelines for Aboriginal writing. The first of these seminars was held in September 2015 and was well received by the fourteen attendees.

Within the setting of the mentorship, the tutors provide a framework for team-teaching and publishing with the emerging writers. The Indigenous inmates and the emerging writers explore connections with Culture through creative writing processes and are assisted in developing their voices. Other important aspects are the opportunity of networking with cultural organisations and fellow writers, as well as developing skills in the independent facilitation of creative writing workshops. The acquisition of these skills enables the mentees to broaden their income stream.

The merging of the creative writing workshops at the JCC and the mentorship program has two projected outcomes: 1) The Aboriginal inmate writers have the opportunity to share their works with local visiting Elders at the JCC. 2) Separate from the JCC readings, public readings by the tutors are envisaged in collaboration with Booranga Writers Centre at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. With the publication of *Dreaming Inside – Voices from Junee Correctional Centre*, volume IV, the mentees will be able to share their own writings and the inmates' workshop material.

The workshops and the resulting publications help increase diversity and cultural awareness, and allow for an ideal setting for the transfer of knowledge to the mentees. The mentorship program provides the emerging writers with a unique opportunity to develop professional confidence and to progress within the literary field. Simultaneously, the Black Wallaby Writers who act as mentors also feel that this is a unique way to ensure the future of the Black Wallaby Indigenous literary program. The mentorship within the infrastructure of the SCWC Indigenous literary program fosters leadership and career development for the mentees. As members of the Black Wallaby Writers team mentees are expected to continue to teach and learn over the coming years and to take part in other literary activities and opportunities created as part of the SCWC Indigenous literary program.

By providing professional opportunities for mentors and mentees to develop and showcase their work in readings and in the anthologies, the project promotes regional Aboriginal artists, arts and culture in NSW and beyond. For example, texts from the earlier volumes have been quoted on broadcasted programs and in international magazines: the GEO Group (Junee Correctional Centre International in-house magazine which is released in Australia, USA and NZ); the *Illawarra Mercury*; the *Wollongong Advertiser* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The publications are also part of the permanent collections of AIATSIS, the Australian National Library, the Wollongong Central Library, the University of Wollongong Library, Junee Correctional Centre's Library and the Australian Studies Resource Centre, and of the University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India. The anthologies also serve as primary sources for law subjects at the University of Wollongong and for Literature and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University and have been translated into Italian for an e-journal in Ravenna, Italy. This exposure, as well as SCWC's literary development framework, increases professional and skill development opportunities for Aboriginal writers living in regional NSW.

The impact of nurturing creativity in textual form in sites that are removed from the public gaze is emphatically expressed in the feedback from the inmates who participated in the project, as one, i.e., put it: “Hey Aunt, are you coming back next week?” The South Coast Writers Centre is currently working on the fourth volume of the anthology of works by Aboriginal inmates, to be released in May, 2016.

Works Cited

- Birch, Tony. 'A National Literature.' Keynote speech, 20th Edinburgh International Book Festival, Edinburgh World Writers' Conference 2013). 23 August 2013. Accessed 24 November 2015.
- Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, xvi bell hooks. Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. London: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Burke, John Muk Muk and Barbara Nicholson. 'Introduction.' *Dreaming Inside – Voices from Junee Correctional Centre, Vol 1*. Wollongong: South Coast Writers Centre, 2013, p.4-5.
- Nicholson, Barbara. 'Introduction.' *Dreaming Inside – Voices from Junee Correctional Centre, Vol 2*. Wollongong: South Coast Writers Centre, 2014, p.6-7.
- _____. Personal Conversation, Wollongong 17 October, 2015.

Authors

Aunty Barbara Nicholson, Dr of Law (Honoris Causa), SCWC Indigenous literary projects leader, tutor and editor.

Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, PhD CA, MA, Director of the South Coast Writers Centre, publisher, tutor and editor.

Chloe Higgins, Project Management Assistant at the South Coast Writers Centre and editor.